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Change Is Gonna Come

With some help from his friends, Don Williams intends to save South Dallas one block at a time

By Robert Wilonsky

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On a fiercely hot Tuesday afternoon, Yolanda Davis sits outside and watches her two children--a 10-year-old girl and a 5-year-old boy--ride bikes up and down weary Collins Avenue in South Dallas. Davis says she is 30 and does not work because she has a criminal record that keeps her from getting a job. So this is how she spends most days, perched on a patch of dirt and surrounded by friends and kinfolk who sip beer in the shade, shoot the breeze and wait for darkness before they head inside. Beneath their feet are empty cans, rusty nails and a pale green Ziploc baggie no bigger than a half-dollar--the kind in which drug dealers sell their crack rocks. Used to be, Davis would sit outside with neighbors till three, four, five in the morning. Not anymore. She says her brother was 20-year-old Kenneth Haggerty, one of two men killed last month in a gang-related shooting at the downtown club El Angel. She worries someone's going to pull up and shoot her too.



J. McDonald Williams—"Don" to everyone who knows him—is attempting to prove private investors can do what public money can't.

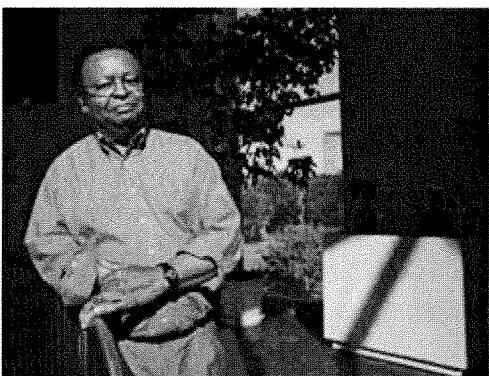
"You be scared to go outside at night," Davis says. "Now it's too risky, because you don't know if they're going to do a drive-by. Every car that goes by, my heart gets to beating real fast."

Davis has lived in this neighborhood on the outskirts of Fair Park all her life. She says she was born and raised where she lives today, in one of the few habitable apartments in the 4524 Collins Avenue Apartments building. The place, which looks like the old Army barracks-style construction common in public housing projects of the 1950s and '60s, is owned by a man named Mark Benton, who lives in Moreno Valley, California. He is the third owner in seven years, according to Dallas County tax records, and Davis says she has never met the landlord. "He doesn't do anything but get his rent every month," Davis says. A sign outside says apartments rent for \$475 a month. That does not include air conditioning. Davis recently had to buy a window unit so her mother, who is not in good health, could keep cool.

But Davis is fortunate to have air conditioning in this neighborhood, which covers more than 1,100 acres and is but a minute's drive from Fair Park. It's commonly referred to as Frazier, after the Frazier Courts projects that stood at Hatcher Street and Spring Avenue from 1942 till last year. There are dozens of homes lining the pockmarked streets that appear to have no window units at all, only open windows and



Ann Lott at the Dallas Housing Authority says she was stunned to find that urban designer Antonio DiMambro lived in Boston.



Nat Tate is spearheading the effort to revitalize Frazier by acquiring and developing property in the area.

tattered screens allowing in the blast-furnace breeze. Some houses barely have roofs, and many have shattered windows and plywood tacked over rotting frames.

Every now and then you will spot a new house. Along Jamaica Street there are two Habitat for Humanity homes being constructed a few yards from a house that's been painted entirely green and decorated with an enormous replica of the Chicago Bulls mascot. A longtime resident explains the place is where folks go late at night to drink beer, shoot pool and play dominoes.

The Frazier neighborhood, which contains the highest-crime area in the city, is what the poorest sections of New Orleans looked like before they were decimated by Hurricane Katrina. Some parts of it look like photos taken *after* the devastation. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of houses decorated with the green and red signs indicating code violations. Code enforcement officials will say there is little they can do, since many of the property owners are out of town or hard to find.

And there is little economy here at all, save for the selling of alcohol inside the liquor stores on the fringes of the neighborhood--and the selling of drugs outside them. Liquor stores are as common here as trees are in Preston Hollow; even though South Dallas accounts for only 5 percent of the city's population, 26 percent of all alcohol sales in the city are made in Frazier and the surrounding neighborhoods.

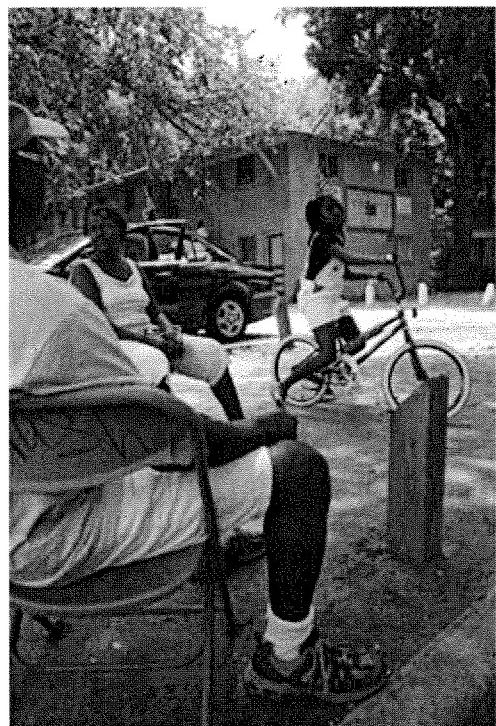
There are dozens of dispiriting statistics from here. According to the latest U.S. Census Bureau data, the median household income among the area's some 6,400 residents, 91 percent of whom are black, is \$15,000. The median household income for the rest of the city is \$47,000. Thirty-eight percent of the neighborhood's residents have had some high school but did not graduate, compared with 14 percent for Dallas as a whole.

"This city really sucks," Davis says. "I feel like the city has abandoned us." Davis is not alone in feeling that way.

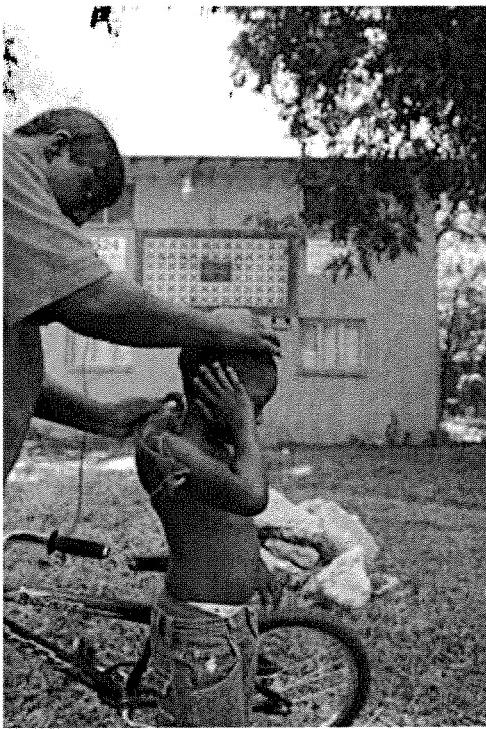
Which is why, at this moment, there are people trying to do what the city would not and could not do for all these years. Maybe, just maybe, a lost and forgotten neighborhood is missing no more.



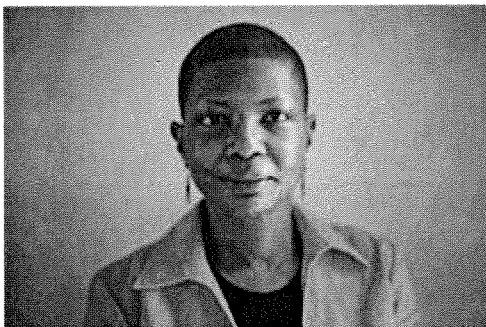
Collins Avenue apartment complex



Collins Avenue apartment complex



Yolanda Davis, far right, with her 5-year-old son, says she has lived her whole life in the Collins Avenue apartment complex that's owned by a California landlord she's never met.



Yvonne Sparks at the Foundation for Community Empowerment says before Frazier can be reborn she'll have to find out what residents want and need—and then help them get it.

Subject(s):

Don Williams, Foundation for Community Empowerment

"It amazes me how this has happened."

The man who says that is Nathaniel "Nat" Tate, who holds in his possession the plan that may contain the blueprint to Frazier's resurrection. On another unbearable weekday afternoon, he is driving around Frazier, pointing out the places where drugs and women are sold. Tate, who once helped Bishop T.D. Jakes build The Potter's House, is now the head of Frazier Revitalization Inc. (FRI), which has a plan for redeveloping the Frazier neighborhood using private money.

"Did you know there's a guy living in there that cranks the walls in his house with a wrench?" says Tate, whose Frazier Revitalization Inc. is the latest offshoot of the Foundation for Community Empowerment (FCE), which was founded in 1995 by then-Trammell Crow Co. Chairman J. McDonald Williams, a powerful man with connections to powerful people who, according to the story he likes to

tell, woke up one day and realized he needed to direct some of that power toward the powerless in this city. Tate is among those Williams has appointed to carry out his mission, which, at this moment, is more dream than reality, but more about that in a moment. First, back to reality.

"Every three, four weeks he has to do it to keep the walls from falling down," Tate says, "and I ask myself, how did a community get to such decline? Is it that the people don't care? Is it that the city doesn't care? They don't give a rip? I'm from New York City. You go to Harlem today, and it's a mecca. I mean, it is *beautiful*. But the other day I took two professors through this community, and they said, 'This is worse than the deepest parts of Mississippi.' But we'll get there. It might take two or three years before people notice it, but we will get there."

The neighborhood's heard this before. God knows how many plans have been cooked up to save South Dallas, how many false prophets have stood at the corner of Misery and Ruin and shouted about impending salvation. And God knows how many times those vows were shattered and Frazier and the surrounding neighborhoods were left to fend for themselves. Today, when you tell people who live in the ramshackle homes that someone's got a plan to fix their neighborhood, they laugh, roll their eyes and wave their hands.

"Ha!" shouts one woman walking down Collins Avenue when informed of the latest venture to rescue South Dallas. "They'll patch it up and swear they did something." And she keeps on walking and laughing.

But FRI might--and one must always preface promise of rebirth down there with a mighty big *might*--be the thing that turns around Frazier. It's using as its foundation some significant development that's already taking place near Fair Park. Just last year, the Dallas Housing Authority tore down the 109 units of the 60-year-old Frazier Court housing project and has begun construction on 76 units of public housing that look less like Army barracks than miniature versions of houses you might find in the suburbs of Far North Dallas. It's the first phase of five that, when completed, will include 40 single-family homes, more than 300 rental units, a 18,000-square-foot Head Start facility and some retail properties.

At least a third of DHA's development is to be paid for by \$20 million in Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE) VI federal grant money. (HOPE VI grants were created in 1992 to upgrade the country's worst public housing units.) DHA also received from the city 9 percent tax credits, worth an estimated \$5.4 million; the city also kicked in \$282,000 in federal community block development grant money. Two years ago, the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs awarded DHA half a million dollars' worth of tax credits. The rest of the money will come from bank loans and Affordable Housing Program loans made by the Federal Home Loan Bank. All told, DHA says the project will cost \$60 million.

For the first time in decades, there is real progress in Frazier. The bulldozers are churning; the bricklayers are spreading mortar; the carpenters are hammering nails. And FRI is about to close on a deal that would turn a piece of land across the street from the Shearith Israel cemetery on Dolphin Road, where a small church now sits, into a 150-unit assisted-living center, the first of its kind in the neighborhood.

And there is a master plan in hand--not the first of its kind but, swears Williams, the last. Like many in this city's recent history, it was created by renowned Boston-based urban planner Antonio DiMambro, whose relationship with the city goes back as far as the Dallas Plan of the early 1990s.

DiMambro's vision for Frazier includes not only the new public housing but affordable single-family homes and town homes and apartment buildings where empty lots and antiquated houses now sit; mixed-use retail and residential development along Scyene Boulevard and Second Avenue, which are dotted with liquor stores and no-tell motels; walking and jogging paths along a drainage ditch that runs

through the neighborhood; and even a "town center" where Spring Avenue and Lagow Street intersect. That is not far from where DART is planning on putting light rail stops along Scyene Boulevard--a major impetus for future retail development, Williams insists.

DiMambro, the Foundation for Community Empowerment and city employees have broken down every square foot of the neighborhood; they know how many buildings there are (2,338), down to the number of "residential sheds and garages that are usually found in the backyards of homes" (312). They know that there are 165 vacant and/or abandoned buildings in the neighborhood, and they know that almost half of the structures in Frazier (precisely 1,014) are in poor condition and that perhaps only 1,000 will be recoverable if and when redevelopment takes place.

(In the interest of full disclosure: Initially, this story was to be solely about FCE and Williams. Only after I began interviewing the principals did I discover they were planning to rehab the neighborhood in which my grandfather's, and now my father's, auto parts store has been since 1955, on Second Avenue. Though Foundation for Community Empowerment officials say they have met with more than 100 members of the neighborhood--the so-called stakeholders--they've never spoken with my dad, who's as much a stakeholder in Frazier as anyone, even though DiMambro classifies the auto parts store under the "undesirable land use" category in his site analysis of the neighborhood. "Well, when you live in shit, you *look* like shit," my old man says.)

Sketches in DiMambro's master plan make Frazier look as happening as the West Village and as wholesome as Disneyland. It's multi-ethnic, a rainbow coalition of those willing to live in a former slum three miles from downtown. It's bright and busy, with some white girl putting groceries into her red scooter while behind her two elderly black women stroll arm-in-arm. A white girl reads next to a stream, and nearby a black man in shorts pushes his bike down a crowded jogging path. Banners hanging along wide streets advertise jazz fests and banks. Apartment complexes rise from small forests, with "tot lots" inviting the kiddies to frolic beneath lush green shade. Retail and commercial sites line heavily trafficked thoroughfares.

"You have to make sure the community owns the plan," DiMambro says. "They have to know it's not something that came from downtown. It came from them and is then brought to the attention of downtown. In a way, that's how I worked with these people. Housing is only one component. The transportation is also a critical element, and they fought to add the DART station at the edge of the neighborhood. It will make a big difference; people need to have access. They want to see things there that are going to serve them."

But what, in the end, makes this promise any different from the dozens of broken promises? Why should anyone believe this fairy-tale vision whose happy ending is years away from being in sight?

Maybe the answer is as simple as one man: Don Williams, at least to those who know and work with him, which happens to include everyone from the mayor to most of the wealthiest people in this city. Without Williams, Ann Lott, president and chief executive officer of the Dallas Housing Authority, would have never been interested in South Dallas. Without him, DiMambro would not have been involved in Frazier's rejuvenation. Without him, there would have been no affordable housing task force.

Is he the savior of South Dallas, of Frazier? That is certainly his goal, and if he does not say so in such blunt terms, do not doubt that the man who ran Trammell Crow for 17 years considers himself capable of anything. He cannot do it alone, of course. He will need his rich friends to reach into their deep wallets; their green will be needed to seed dirty patches of Frazier and beyond. They will have to commit their businesses to South Dallas in ways they never have. They will have to prove they're not only wealthy but also willing to let their money grow in a place where nothing ever takes root save poverty.

"What we do is we bridge," Williams says. "I've got some degree of credibility in the business community and the philanthropic community and, in some levels, in the political community, and it takes all of those in appropriate partnerships with community leaders and organizations to effect real changes. You know there's a problem, but our interest is in large-scale system change, and I have become convinced that it is through empowering the neighborhood...You've got to have grassroots relationships, and you've got to have relationships with the power structures. Otherwise, things don't change."

From the 32nd floor of the Trammell Crow building downtown--the Foundation for Community Empowerment's Spartan offices are across the hall from Trammell Crow's headquarters--Williams, who is still chairman emeritus, likes to tell the story about "the re-education of a white downtown business boy" who went to South Dallas a smart guy and came back a humbled one. He recounts how, one afternoon in 1995, he went to Lincoln High School to visit with the famously short-tempered principal there, the late Napoleon Lewis, who was once seen as the educational (and, some would have said, spiritual) leader of all of southern Dallas. Williams had just shown up out of nowhere, figuring a "big-shot downtown boy" didn't need to make an appointment. Lewis agreed to see Williams and listened to him talk for about half an hour, but Williams could tell the principal didn't give one damn about what the Trammell Crow CEO had to say.

"I was really miffed," Williams says. "So I said, 'Dr. Lewis, I really appreciate and respect you a great deal, and if there is anything we can do to be useful to you, let me know.' I was prepared to leave, and he said, 'Sit down, boy. You know, boy, I've been listening to you for a while, and I've been trying to figure out what your hustle is.' I said, 'Sir, you know Trammell Crow Company is not going to be doing any projects over here. I'm not making any investments. I'm not running for any political office. I just care about these issues, so what you see is what you get.' And he said, 'Then you're the first white businessman to come into Lincoln High School in the 25 years that I've been here that didn't have a hustle.' That was the closest I had to an epiphany. I saw what the trust levels were. I knew then I had to step back and listen."

And that, says everyone interviewed for this story, is precisely what Williams has done for 11 years. Which is why, only now, the Foundation for Community Empowerment is beginning to have the kind of impact Williams hoped. In this month's issue of *Governing* magazine, there was a lengthy piece that asked "Can Dallas Govern Itself?" The answer was: Sorta, maybe, not really, it's getting there. Among the bright spots cited in the story was the Foundation for Community Empowerment, which, the magazine insisted, "has developed into a civic force by becoming a repository of hard data and creative ideas for the city as a whole."

It also cited some of its accomplishments since the foundation's inception, including how, in 2002, Williams approached Mayor Laura Miller about the city's need for affordable housing and not only got himself appointed co-chair of the affordable workforce housing task force, but also entirely reshaped the city's housing department. Then, in October 2003, Miller and Dallas County Judge Margaret Keliher made Williams co-chair of their jobs task force, which was charged with trying to lower the city's unemployment rate.

"After that," wrote Rob Gurwitt in *Governing*, "Williams took aim at the city's dismally performing public school system, putting together another task force to figure out how to transform it. A few months ago, its recommendations were adopted by the notoriously fractious school board. The schools--and the school board--still have a long way to go, but for the first time in many years, there's a sense in Dallas that they might be salvageable."

Williams, of course, is not a one-man band. The foundation's president is Cecilia Edwards, a former business consultant to *Fortune* 500 companies who essentially wrote the housing task force report. Its director of community building is Yvonne Sparks, who worked in nonprofits and community development programs in St. Louis before moving to Dallas last November at Williams' behest. Sparks

is charged with perhaps the most fundamental piece of the foundation's agenda: talking to folks in South Dallas, finding out what they want and need to happen to their community and then making it happen. In short, she's there to make sure the Foundation for Community Empowerment gives the power to the people.

"Dallas is a big little town," Sparks says. "It has many of the same characteristics of St. Louis, which is also a medium-sized little town. But from a historical perspective and a psychological perspective--and, to some extent, a pathological perspective--neither city ever came to real reckoning about issues of race, and that does something to the psyche of the city. Even though they go through the motions, maybe they keep the peace, and then everybody assumes everything is OK...the power structure is never challenged to the degree that it has to examine itself, nor are the minority communities ever going through a truly empowering process. It's the accommodation."

Also working with the foundation, and Tate in particular, is Paul Yelder, a Maryland-based community development consultant who was instrumental in reshaping the Dudley Street neighborhood in Boston, a slum so infamous during the 1980s that its rebirth a decade later was the subject of a PBS documentary called *Higher Ground*. Yelder says Frazier is "remarkably similar" to Dudley Street in terms of the decay and benign neglect on the part of the city; Boston, like Dallas, was "well-meaning," Yelder says, "but did nothing."

And like in South Dallas, he says, "we weren't the first to try and save Dudley Street. There had been tons of studies, tons of plans, tons of initiative. But what happened was there was patient philanthropic capital coming in. We had a foundation at Dudley Street that was willing to invest in the long haul and wasn't looking for a quick hit here or there. They understood that this was going to be a long initiative."

And earlier this year, former *Dallas Morning News* columnist Victoria Loe Hicks joined the foundation as well, with the hope she would begin something similar to the *City Journal*, a public-policy magazine published by the enormously influential Manhattan Institute in New York City. Hicks will edit and contribute to *The Williams Review*, an academic journal that will debut in October. And the foundation counts among its board members the likes of Rafael Anchía, the local attorney and DISD school board trustee being courted by Ron Kirk and others to run for mayor; former EDS Vice President John Castle; Dallas Cowboy-turned-businessman Pettis Norman; and Internet billionaire-turned-movie producer Todd Wagner, who runs his own foundation for inner-city kids.

When *Governing* said the foundation was a repository of hard data, it was referring to the J. McDonald Williams Institute, which employs professors and social scientists to study and write papers about such things as the crime and mortality rates in South Dallas and the potential for private investors in low-income neighborhoods. Their research is used not only to sell private investors on the need for getting involved in neighborhoods such as Frazier, but also to affect public policy--or, in the case of Fair Park neighborhoods, to create a public policy that doesn't involve walking away from problems created over decades of neglect.

"Frankly, what Don has been able to do is to at least begin to get some of these issues on the map," Hicks says. "I was in a conversation with one of the leading philanthropists in Dallas. This person, who has donated untold tens of millions of dollars to cultural things in Dallas, said, 'You know, maybe I haven't paid enough attention to South Dallas. Maybe I haven't paid enough attention to those sorts of issues.' That is what Don has been able to do: Get his foot in the door and the thought in your head."

Don Williams is upfront about this one important point: He does not know when Frazier will begin to look one bit different than it does today. He does not know when the retail and residential developments will come or when the commercial businesses will move back in and set up shop the way Ford did before abandoning its 50-acre plant on Grand Avenue in 1968. All that stuff is in the

DiMambro plan because Williams and his staff and colleagues and DiMambro himself want it there and believe it will be there, some as early as two to three years from now.

The people who live in Frazier--and who are dying at an accelerated rate, according to FCE's research--do not have much longer to wait. And the only people more impatient than they are businessmen who like their investments to start giving back almost before they are made.

Williams thought this would be an easy fix--couple of years, a few million, it'll take care of itself "like any other business problem," as he puts it. That was 11 years ago, and the foundation is only this far now.

"When I came in," he says, "finally one of the community leaders over there took me aside and said, 'You know, we're not sure, but there may be a tiny shred of truth in what you're saying, but we're not sure yet.' They've heard it from everybody--politicians, business people, hustlers. They said, 'Let me tell you how things work.'"

And, usually, they don't.

But this much is certain: Without Williams, there would be no real development in Frazier. The land for the assisted-living home would not have been acquired, using money the foundation got from private investors. And the city would not be working to make Frazier a Neighborhood Improvement Project, which will allow for repaired streetlights and sidewalks and other basic infrastructure needs. And that new public housing development that is being worked on at this very moment would not exist.

Six years ago, Frazier Courts and the surrounding neighborhood were a limb the city was ready to saw off. The DHA's Ann Lott knows this as well as anyone. In 2000, her attention was toward West Dallas, where DHA was using some \$200 million in U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development grants and other loans to eradicate the slums that blanketed the area. It was Lott's charge to demolish and replace the infamous public housing developments--George Loving Place, Edgar Ward Place and Elmer Scott Place--that led to the 1985 federal lawsuit known now only as "the Walker case." The DHA had a short time to exterminate decades' worth of blight.

And it did just that. Today, the Lakewest Housing Development, which is actually several different complexes and a multipurpose center (it houses, among other things, a YMCA and a Head Start) spread over more than 400 acres near Hampton and Westmoreland streets, looks almost like a suburban sanctuary. The residents are still among the poorest in the city--in some instances, rent, which is based on income, is as low as \$25 a month--but the properties are clean, bright, well-tended-to, safe and hospitable. There is even a section of the development in which folks can own homes, some of which run upward of \$160,000.

"There were a lot of people who would tell us to our face, even people on my staff who would say, 'Why will anyone spend \$140,000 to live in West Dallas next to public housing?'" Lott says. "They would say, 'They can live anywhere in the city, why would they live *there*?' The answer is, some of them were raised there, went to church there and had a social conscience and wanted to be part of the process. They were never given the opportunity because there were never quality homes. It's as simple as that."

Folks down in Frazier know all about West Dallas. They have family and friends living in Lakewest, and that's where some of Frazier's residents went when their homes were leveled last year. It's what they hope for their neighborhood--that someone will come in and scrape it down to the soil and start all over again.

But Frazier wasn't on Lott's radar in 2000. She was in West Dallas and looking to the next project--

probably near Cedar Springs Boulevard and Maple Avenue, she says. But that year she heard Don Williams speak at a conference about South Dallas and how people were sick there and how kids couldn't read there and about how nobody could get a job there, and she decided to make South Dallas and Frazier Courts--not to mention two other nearby housing projects in dire need of razing, Rhoads Terrace and Turner Courts--next on DHA's to-do list.

"The interest in the South Dallas neighborhood was always there," Lott says. "That was always on Don Williams' heart. I knew that, and that's why I approached him for the help. As a matter of fact, when we had received the announcement we were going to get the grant, while I was elated I was also concerned that our property was going to be the best-looking housing in the neighborhood, and that would have been a failure. It's a lot of money to put into a decaying neighborhood."

It took several years to get the money, but on March 5, 2003, HUD approved that \$20 million HOPE VI grant, and DHA went forward with its plan to renew Frazier Courts. Last year, the courts finally came down, and the people who lived there were given vouchers to live in other public housing developments till their new homes were ready.

"It felt great to see the housing come down," Lott says. "It was so much... *brighter*. And I felt like, 'It's happening,' and it feels even better to see the new housing going up. Ten years from now we'll be able to drive by there and say, 'We made a difference.'"

But it will make no sense to have nice public housing surrounded by blight and decay, which is why Tate has been charged with trying to acquire land in the neighborhood for projects DiMambro has put in his extensive plan. It will not be easy: For every one property owner you can find in South Dallas, there are dozens who are out of town or impossible to find, since many of the houses down there have been passed to generations of residents who have long since disappeared. Lott says that since seizing them under eminent domain is not an option--each instance has to be approved by HUD when public-housing entities are involved--"it will be a challenge, but you have to keep the faith."

For years, that is all the folks in South Dallas have had to go on: faith that things will get better.

"South Dallas is not going to really change with the help of a few people here and there," Williams says. "So many of my friends in Dallas don't believe anything good can ever come in lower-income areas. So we've got to prove that there can be change other than through kicking out people and moving them somewhere else. I think if we can get that kind of comprehensive revitalization going, it will demonstrate the model works, and I think a lot of people will come on board. Now that is what we're trying to do, and if that is a pipe dream, then it is a pipe dream. But that's what we're trying to do."

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